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ABSTRACT

This report establishes a foundation of information about how children in classroom settings develop visual literacy. Data was gathered during five 45-minute sessions with a second and a fourth grade classroom during which children looked at pictures in four versions of the Noah's Ark tale. The intent was to elicit whatever children chose to say about their observations of the books, then have them choose a favorite version and justify that choice. A description of the classroom discussions during the sessions is presented, and focuses on the order in which the children chose to look at and discuss the books; picture content; artists' use of color and lines; and page layout. Six tables present data: order of presentation; order of choice; comments about pictures for both grade 2 and grade 4; and comments about text for both grades. Some childrens' comments are provided to illustrate the range of their concerns. It was discovered, when verbal class discussions and written descriptions about their final picture choice were compared, that the written products were far less skilled than the discussion, implying that a more effective way to capture the thoughts of the children fully would have been to tape record their comments. Contains 13 references. (MAS)

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# Children's Observations About the Art in Picture Books

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## Children's Observations About the Art in Picture Books

What can we learn about children's observing and responding skills, when we engage them in directed looking at the art in picture books? The exploration in classes with children reported here is a continuation of work reported elswhere, attempting to establish a foundation of information about how children respond to pictures (Stewig, 1990). This foundational data gathering is critical, since we know little of how children's visual literacy develops in classroom settings. Psychologists have explored extensively children's perceptions, that is, the physical reception of visual stimuli, in laboratory settings, as in the work reported by Houghton and Williams (1987). There is far less information available about how children observe and talk or write about art in typical classroom settings, though some programs advocate this (Duke, 1985; Eisner, n.d.). As such data become available, it should be possible to develop visual literacy programs to enhance students' ability to look at, think about, and respond to pictures.

### THE CONTEXT

These data were gathered during five, forty-five minute sessions with children attending a suburban nondenominational private school. One second grade (n=17) and one fourth grade class (n=20) participated. The school curriculum provides weekly contact with an art specialist, though the program focuses primarily on producing art, with only minimal emphasis on looking at and responding to art. The school also stresses a process approach to writing instruction, which encourages children to express their ideas.

### PROCEDURES

In five sessions spread over a two week period, we looked at the pictures in four versions of the Noah's Ark tale (see references). The purpose of the lessons was not to teach particular concepts about the art involved. Rather the intent was to elicit whatever children chose to describe about their observations of the books, part of the larger goal of developing in children "effective ways of talking about literature" (Jalongo, 1988, p. 90). The children made predictions about the story and the nature of the art based on their observations of the books' covers, noticed with care what the illustrator had created while listening to the story read aloud, and then in follow-up discussion made whatever comments they wished. Finally, the children's task was to choose a favorite version, and write about the reasons for their choice.

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Some overall observations may clarify what happened during the sequence of lessons. To establish the order of presentation in each class, all four books were set out, and one child was asked to choose which book to use that day. By coincidence, the order of choice was identical in both classrooms.

Day One

In both 2nd and 4th grade, a child chose Hogrogian as the first book. During the introductory session, it became apparent that these children didn't perceive it important to talk about how the pictures were made (i.e., either media used or visual elements present), unless they were specifically prompted to do so. The students' comments were exclusively about content, that is, mostly plot summary, until they were asked to talk about the pictures. They did talk about the art when asked how this art looked different from that in other picture books they had seen.

When they were asked specifically about art elements, as described by Miller and Ragans (1992), they were able to talk about these, noting--for example--artists' use of color. After further discussion, one child did mention line (and gave an example of lines to show facial expression in a different book). Hobbs and Salome (1991) point out that in addition to talking about visual elements, children should be able to talk about compositional principles. When prompted about page layout, one child did notice that the picture continues across the page even though it is not continuous; that is, it is split at the gutter but it is the same picture. Children had to be prompted to encode in words where the type was on the page. They'd say left page, but didn't say bottom or top, even though that had been modeled for them.

These children often fixated on the content of pictures. For example, fourth graders talked at length about a page where, leaving the ark, the people are shown as big as trees. One child said this was the artist's way of making them important. Another commented that it's just that they are closer and the trees are farther away; he called children's attention to trees outside the window which illustrated his idea.

In each class we had long discussions about the Hogrogian title page, which is murky with few distinguishable objects. In the second grade, the children were sure this showed water that was deep, because this it was so black. In the fourth grade, children thought it was the beginning of the universe and showed God creating the world, giving the light.

Many students at both grade levels knew the story and could discuss details in it at great length. It was interesting that in neither group would any child comment verbally about Hogrogian's illustration of Adam and Eve, shown nude in an early illustration. In each class some children smiled or snickered about this the first time through. Given a choice of what pictures they wanted to talk about, none would venture to talk about that one. Ideas about what constitutes appropriate content for classroom discussion is apparently established early, albeit covertly.

Day Two

By coincidence, both children choosing this day selected the version by Fuchshuber. Again it was evident that children at this age fixate. They started talking about why one of the animal's legs were striped when the rest of its' body was solid color, and at least 10 of them had to say something about this. This discrepancy isn't

in any way critical to the illustration aesthetically, or to the plot, but several wanted to express ideas about it anyway.

One child in each class commented without any prompting on the visual distance shown in the pictures. The scenes in this book are depicted from much farther away than are those in the Hogrogian. Doonan (1993) points out that children are aware of this feature because of the varying of visual distance common in the filming of television shows. Children also commented on how far along the building process is (i.e., Hogrogian shows only the skeleton of the ark while it is nearer completion in Fuchshuber's edition). In each class, a child also commented that in the Hogrogian version, Noah is older then in this version. Someone in each class noticed that Hogrogian spreads illustrations across two pages, while Fuchshuber never does.

Day Three

On the third day, both a second and fourth grade child chose the book by Jane Ray. In each class, one child commented that Noah is black. In both classes several children noticed God's head is shown, contrasted with just His hand in the Fuchshuber version. In the second grade, children noticed that one of the pictures in the book is identical to the back of the dust jacket, but in a different size. That led to a lot of talk about variation, and particularly the difference between the word *same* and the word *similar*.

Children in the fourth grade were disturbed by what they termed the modernity of the pictures. One pointed out that the bright clothes and paint didn't seem appropriate, because people didn't have such bright colors back then. Fourth graders speculated that this book would be for younger children, as the pictures weren't realistic, and young children don't care whether pictures are real or not.

In both the second and fourth grade children wondered about mood, though that wasn't the term they used to describe it. Several children commented that the people were brightly dressed, holding hands, and there were flags on the ship. This seemed too festive for the children, and they wondered if the people didn't believe what God had said. This is an example of the way children at this age perseverate on a small detail and talk at length about something the teacher would rather move beyond.

Day Four

The last book to be chosen in each group was the one illustrated by Pauline Baynes, whose pictures accompany text from the King James version of the Bible. The vocabulary involved, and the complicated syntax, made this the most difficult text for children to process.

The text presented problems the fourth grade children wanted to discuss. They asked how all the people on earth could be descended from Noah as asserted in the text, because what would account for blacks and Asians? They wanted to know the meaning of *clean* and *unclean*.

The text presented vocabulary-related opportunities which were followed up by the classroom teacher. This version uses the word *cubit*, and as their homework, she assigned children to compare their cubit (i.e., the length of a forearm) with their parent's cubit.

The illustrations also stimulated considerable discussion. Children speculated that because the cover shows the animals leaving the ark, the author would probably get

into the story more quickly than the Hogrogian version, which featured a long description of the Adam and Eve story at the beginning. Fourth graders focused on content questions, including: "Why wouldn't the crocodile have eaten the horses?" and "What if one of the animals had died during the trip, how could they reproduce?"

Some visual observations were made by children in both grade levels. In each class children wanted to know why the ark is several colors in the beginning of the story and not later. Unsolicited comments about design format throughout these sessions were rare, but in this case a second grader commented that the first word of text is enlarged.

## DATA SUMMARY

In addition to this impressional overview of our discussions, it may be helpful to provide some quantification of responses. Table 1 shows the child-chosen order of presentation, and in the two right columns, the number of children who eventually chose each book as their favorite.

Table 2 shows in rank order which books were chosen.

## RESPONDING IN WRITING

On the last day, all four books were displayed and children had as much time as they needed to choose a favorite and write about their choice. The books were placed in different parts of the room so there would be space for children to go to their favorite and check details as they were writing, if they wished, which in fact most children did at some time during the writing period.

Writings were collected, typed, and analyzed. Categories were not determined ahead of time, but rather emerged as similar kinds of comments, expressed differently, expressed differently, were grouped, a procedure recommended by Hudson (1986). For example, "The pictures were very clear and easy to see," "The pictures looked more like a camera took them," and "These are the boldest pictures," were all grouped together under a category labeled *style*. After this analysis, comments were tallied. Tables 3 and 4 present, in rank order, the comments children made about pictures.

| Table 1: Order of Presentation | | |
|---|---|---|
| Order of Presentation | Number of Children Choosing | |
| | 2nd grade | 4th grade |
| 1. Hogrogian | 0 | 1 |
| 2. Fuchshuber | 10 | 10 |
| 3. Ray | 4 | 6 |
| 4. Baynes | 3 | 3 |

Table 2 shows in rank order which books were chosen.

| Table 2: Order of Choice | |
|---|---|
| 2nd grade | 4th grade |
| 1. Fuchshuber | 1. Fuchshuber |
| 2. Ray | 2. Ray |
| 3. Baynes | 3. Baynes |
| 4. No choice | 4. Hogrogian |

| Table 3: Comments About Pictures | |
|---|---|
| Item - Grade 2 | No.* |
| 1. pictures show action | 20 |
| 2. page layout | 14 |
| 3. show object | 12 |
| 4. style | 10 |
| 5. craftsmanship | 9 |
| 6. amount of color | 7 |
| 7. show animals | 7 |
| 8. light and dark | 6 |
| 9. show people | 3 |
| 10. detail | 2 |

*N of comments totals more than number of Ss, as in most cases several comments were made by each S.

| Table 4: Comments About Pictures | |
|---|---|
| Item - Grade 4 | No. |
| 1. amount of color | 17 |
| 2. detail | 16 |
| 3. page layout | 10 |
| 4. style | 9 |
| 5. show object | 9 |
| 6. show animals | 9 |
| 7. pictures show action | 8 |
| 8. light and dark | 7 |
| 9. craftsmanship | 6 |
| 10. show people | 6 |
| 11. texture | 1 |
| 12. size of picture | 1 |

Tables 5 and 6 summarize comments children made about text.

| Table 5: Comments about Text | |
|---|---|
| Item - Grade 2 | No. |
| 1. relation between words and pictures | 7 |
| 2. style | 7 |
| 3. amount of words | 5 |
| 4. comprehension of | 4 |
| 5. descriptiveness | 4 |
| 6. amount of detail | 1 |
| 7. word layout | 1 |

| Table 6: Comments About Text | |
|---|---|
| Item - Grade 4 | No. |
| 1. action told in words | 10 |
| 2. relation between words and pictures | 9 |
| 3. comprehension of | 5 |
| 4. style | 5 |
| 5. amount of detail | 5 |
| 6. descriptiveness | 2 |

Some specific comments from the children's writing show the range of their concerns.

## COMMENTS ABOUT PICTURES

Grade Two

*The pictures are good and let you fly away with them.*

Laura

*The pictures looked more like a camera took them.*

Casey

*And the pictures have a mix of pastel, markers, and watercolors. It looked so real you could jump into the pictures.*

Cullen

Grade Four

*It is very descriptive where it showed all the bad people and houses going down in the water, and the houses were all slanted in the water.*

Donny

*I think the animals are drawn well. I like the elephant best because he is drawn abstract like. He does not look real because he is cubistic.*

Lucas

*The light and shadows were excellent. Under every animal you could see their shadows.*

Michael

*My favorite is the ark when it's chopped in half and you're looking in. Every room is filled and you can see shadows from the people and animals.*

Katie

*This was all out of depth perception.*

Christopher

## COMMENTS ABOUT WORDS

Grade Two

*There were lots of words. There were also interesting words like cubits.*

Cullen

*They put the words in different places.*

Brian

*It is easy to read. I like it because it doesn't have Hebrew.*

Sam

*I like it because it didn't have a weird language.*

Owen

Grade Four

*I like the words in this book because they are written in old English, and I think they sound nice.*

Sarah

*I like this best because it has descriptive old words like thy, and creepeth.*

*I don't exactly like old language, but for some reason I really liked this language. It was different from the rest.*

Nisha

## COMMENTS ABOUT RELATIONSHIPS BETWEEN WORDS AND PICTURES

Grade Two

*The words are interesting because when it says the dove came back with*

*a plant, the pictures even show the dove with a plant. When it says they found fresh green land the pictures even show it too.*

Eric

Grade Four

*For example, when in the words said Noah was running out of food, in the pictures he looked sad.*

Meredith

## CONCLUSION

It was clear from analyzing the discussions that children are indeed interested in talking about the visuals in picture books. These two groups (total N=37) talked a lot, about many different aspects of the versions of the same tale which we compared and contrasted. The type of talking they did is also revealing. Most of the comments centered on the narrative quality of the pictures, that is, relating visual information to such literary elements as plot, characterization, setting, conflict, and conclusion. Jalongo (1988) points out that children use pictures to clarify and expand text as they move from what she calls a "picture-governed" to a "text-governed" approach to constructing meaning. Doonan (1993) points out that focusing on this story-telling quality is one of three possible uses for pictures, though she argues we need to help children move to more sophisticated, aesthetic uses. Though these children did comment about such visual elements as color, shape, dimension, and texture, such comments were most often related to concerns about the narration. It is apparent that these children didn't talk often, or easily, about either visual elements or compositional devices, apart from how the artist used these to clarify or enhance the story itself. Conscious instruction in talking about visual elements and composition over a period of time might increase the number and variety in comments about visuals.

Comparing what children said in discussion with what they wrote suggests that we don't get as full a reflection of children's thinking/reacting when they write their ideas. These are bright, privileged children, and yet the discrepancy between their talking and writing, at both second and fourth grades, was striking. During the four discussion periods, children were eager to express their ideas, noticing subtle aspects of the illustrations that many adults might not notice. Yet on the fifth day, when they were to make a final choice and write about it, they got slowed down by details of enscribing. Children raised many questions; typical ones were: "Does it matter which side the holes are on?" Or, "Is this enough?" Their writing apprehension, not about ideas but about the forms of writing, was apparent, despite the schools process writing program, which does not emphasize form concerns. In general, the written products were far less skilled than was the discussion. The observations are less fully developed in writing, and do not reflect the richness of the oral talk from these fluent speakers. Clearly a more effective way to fully capture the thoughts of the children would have been to tape record and then transcribe the sessions. Nonetheless, we can learn much about how children in classrooms respond to picture books when we engage them in activities like this.

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